



SANTA CRUZ, CALIFORNIA 95064

E2 Building

January 11, 2015

Re: Sikhs and Sikhism in the State of California History-Social Science Framework

Instructional Quality Commission
California Department of Education
Sacramento, California

Dear IQC Members:

I am writing in my capacity as the holder of the Sarbjit Singh Aurora Chair in Sikh Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz. The matter which I wish to address is the representation of Sikhs and Sikhism in the California History-Social Science Framework. When the Sikh Coalition submitted specific suggestions to the California Department of Education, to improve the accuracy of references to Sikhs and Sikhism, I was one of many people who were given an opportunity to review the changes, and I found them to be wholly appropriate, and a significant improvement on the language of the pre-existing framework.

I have now had a chance to review the responses and suggestions of the Hindu American Foundation (HAF) and California Parents for the Equalization of Educational Materials (CPEEM). I would like to make the case that these comments are inappropriate, and that the text suggested by the Sikh Coalition should be adopted in full. While the HAF and CPEEM comments are superficially plausible, based on considerations of “nationality” versus religion, I would argue that the case of the Sikhs is not comparable to that of the other groups used by the HAF or CPEEM in their reasoning.

First, the unique heterogeneity and history of “South Asia” makes it a problematic label in general, and particularly for Sikhs. While the Sikh faith originated in a specific region of South Asia, using the broader term essentially erases the special identity of Sikhs, which includes aspects of language, culture and ethnicity, and not just religion. This is of vital importance in California, where the vast majority of early immigrants from South Asia were Sikhs. The problem is somewhat akin to earlier tendencies to lump together all “Asians,” whereas now immigrants from different parts of Asia are recognized for their distinct languages, cultures and backgrounds. Hence, if the goal of the History-Social Science Framework is to recognize the history and cultures of the

different groups now residing in California, the suggestions of the HAF and CPEEM would be a significant retrograde step.

The first point is reinforced if one thinks of the current status of Sikhs in California schools. Sikh children, because of their distinctive appearance, are uniquely subject to a level of bullying that is probably not faced by other groups from South Asia. These students need an educational framework that recognizes their distinctive heritage, and makes it known to their classroom peers, as well as to their teachers. The HAF and CPEEM suggestions would destroy the important beneficial outcomes flowing from the language of the recommendations of the Sikh Coalition.

A third observation provides a suggestion for meeting some of the concerns of the HAF and CPEEM. Those concerns are ostensibly that Sikhs do not deserve recognition as a distinctive immigrant group in California. In the process, their suggestions effectively erase Sikhs from their significant role in California's history of immigration and diversity. A better solution would have been to add language that would enrich students' understanding of California's diversity. For example, in working on a book on Indian Americans, my co-authors and I have identified distinctive waves of immigration. The first two waves, going back many decades, were completely dominated in California by Punjabi speakers (almost certainly Sikhs, based on early migration and family preference rules), whereas the last two decades have been weighted towards speakers of Tamil and Telegu, from southern India, mostly attracted by Silicon Valley's growth. What we find in our work-in-progress is that "Indian American" is far too heterogeneous a category to be useful in many cases for historian or social scientists. This provides another perspective on the importance of recognizing the distinctive history and characteristics of Sikhs, and a further argument for not hiding them in a rather amorphous "South Asian" category.

To summarize, Sikhs are different enough, and important enough, in California's history and its current society to merit being identified as a distinct group. This identification is important for the well-being of Sikhs who go through California's public school system, and for informing their peers and teachers. Finally, there are modern scholarly reasons for a more fine-grained view of California's diversity. For these reasons, I find the HAF and CPEEM responses to be wholly without merit, and I strongly support adoption of the language suggested by the Sikh Coalition, which is based on wide-ranging scholarly and community inputs.

Please feel free to contact me for any further details, comments or feedback that I can provide.

Sincerely,



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